



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**COLOMBIA**

## E-Bulletin

### Workshop for Journalists: Memory and Truth, the Foundations of Social Reconciliation



Camilo Sánchez, an expert with *Centro de Estudios De Justicia*, emphasizes the importance of grassroots social reconstruction initiatives.

***...the journalists to comply with their duty to recognize that “the people come before the stories”, and emphasized how the truth cannot be sacrificed to the perceived need to publish scoops.***

**Jesús Abad**  
Photojournalist

After fifty years of violence, the greatest challenge facing the Colombian government is to provide reparations to more than five million victims of the Colombian internal armed conflict. The reparation of victims transcends key issues such as economic compensation for damages suffered and the return of seized lands. It also entails restoring victims' rights, recovering their dignity, and ensuring that the crimes committed against them will never be repeated. Only in this way will it be possible to create the conditions for reconciliation within society.

For this reason, the **USAID Public Policy Program**, in alliance with the Political Science Institute, an important civil society think tank, conducted a training workshop for journalists titled "The Media and Transitional Justice in Colombia". The workshop was attended by close to 40 journalists from the national media and the media in regions affected by the internal armed conflict, such as the Departments of César and Norte de Santander. The participants included representatives of the country's main opinion newspapers and magazines, as well as television and radio stations whose combined audience of almost five million Colombian families, nearly half of the country's population, will undoubtedly be the first direct beneficiaries of the lessons imparted in this workshop.

The Colombian media are the most influential factor in guiding public opinion among the country's 47 million citizens.

Because of their enormous penetration, reaching 98% of the population, they have the capacity to help victims learn about and reclaim their rights in a very complex process that involves more than forty different government agencies. Even more important is the media's social function of ensuring the victims' right to the truth. Indeed, the media play a vital role in preparing the public to confront the violent past<sup>1</sup>.

The workshop began with a presentation by photojournalist Jesús Abad, who discussed the media's ethical obligation to report the truth without distortion and to construct society's collective memory. Exhibiting more than one hundred images of the effects of the conflict over the last fifteen years, presenting facts about massacres, disappearances and displacements, and recalling historic tragedies in Bojayá, Montes de María, Trujillo and Urabá, he urged the journalists to comply with their duty to recognize that "the people come before the stories", and emphasized how the truth cannot be sacrificed to the perceived need to publish scoops.

The training session then focused on an analysis of transitional justice mechanisms and the dilemmas raised by their implementation, as well as a study of the routes for providing reparations to victims. The journalists engaged in news writing and discussion exercises, with an emphasis on explaining individual and collective reparation measures, as well as peace initiatives proposed by victims and civil society.

A crucial part of the workshop involved a discussion of the media's role in enhancing the visibility of victims, as demonstrated by *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*, an NGO whose Truth and Memory Commission has collected the stories of more than 2400 women victims in nine regions of the country as a mechanism for establishing conditions for reconciliation. The participants emphasized the social function of the media in uncovering the truth, monitoring judicial processes and reparation measures, and, above all, mobilizing society to ensure that the crimes perpetrated will never occur again.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the workshop was provided by Yaneth, a former guerrilla who is in the process of being reincorporated into civilian life through the Colombian Reintegration Agency. She recounted her experience in the guerrilla movement, the manner in which she is serving an alternative six-year sentence, and the social rejection to which she has been subjected as a reinserted former combatant. She made a profound impact by declaring her remorse for the pain that she has caused, asking forgiveness, and recognizing that she will always be in society's debt. Her testimony was the best example of how there can be no reparation of victims without justice, and no justice without truth. These are, ultimately, the fundamental conditions for social reconciliation, forgiveness and peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.ideaspaz.org/portal/images/cuadernos\\_medios.pdf](http://www.ideaspaz.org/portal/images/cuadernos_medios.pdf)